Licensing, blocking, and English pronoun case

Heidi Quinn, University of Canterbury, New Zealand
heidi.quinn@canterbury.ac.nz

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Abstract

This paper examines diachronic changes in the form-meaning mapping of English pronoun case forms. I propose that the increasing influence of surface position on pronoun case is a by-product of a shift in the licensing of arguments during the Middle English period, and I argue that the direction of the observed changes follows the predictions of the Blocking Principle.

0 Introduction

Aronoff (1976: 43ff) introduced the notion of 'blocking' to account for the absence of derived nouns in *–ity* when there is already an existing abstract noun filling the relevant meaning slot (e.g. *grace* blocks **graciosity*). The idea that a difference in form must correlate with a difference in meaning has proved very influential in research on language acquisition, language processing, and the evolution of morphological paradigms, and has inspired countless principles and generalisations (see for instance Clark & Clark 1979, Pinker 1984, Lapointe 1985, Clark 1987, Williams 1997, Carstairs-McCarthy 1994 & 1999).

The Blocking Principle (also known as the Unique Entry Principle) stipulates that a cell in an inflectional paradigm cannot be filled by more than one form (cf. Pinker 1984: 177, Williams 1997: 578). If the original meaning difference between two distinct forms in a paradigm is lost, then

(a) one of the forms will be eliminated from the paradigm, **or**

(b) the different forms will be reanalysed as encoding a new meaning difference.[1]

[1] This development is also predicted by Clark's (1987) Principle of Contrast. Many thanks to Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy for drawing my attention to Eve Clark's research as well as Roger Lass' (1990) paper.

As Lass (1990: 83-95) illustrates in two particularly interesting examples from Germanic and Afrikaans, once the original motivation for an inflectional contrast has been lost, the residual forms may be redeployed to mark entirely novel morphosyntactic distinctions.

The following sections examine the distribution of pronoun case forms in Old English and Present-Day English and relate the case differences between the two stages of English to changes in the licensing of structural arguments. The loss of morphological licensing at the end of the Old English period meant that the case forms of strong pronouns, in particular, lost much of their original significance as indicators of argument status.[2] The formal difference between nominative and objective case forms thus no longer encoded a clear meaning difference in the strong pronoun paradigm, which is precisely the kind of situation where we would expect the Blocking Principle to apply. As we will see in Section 2.2, the distribution of strong pronoun case forms in Present-Day English offers evidence for both of the developments predicted by the Blocking Principle:

(a) There is a clear trend towards the use of invariant forms (*him, her, us, them,* and to a lesser extent *me*) in strong pronoun contexts, which suggests that the nominative forms of strong pronouns (especially strong non-1sg pronouns) are slowly being eliminated.

(b) Within a strong pronoun construction, the phonologically less complex forms *me, he, she, we, they* tend to appear in asymmetrically c-commanding positions, while the phonologically more complex forms *I, him, her, us, them* tend to appear in syntactically more complex asymmetrically c-commanded positions, which suggests that the different pronoun case forms have been reanalysed as markers of relative syntactic position.

1 Pronoun case in Old English

[2] See Cardinaletti & Starke (1999) and Quinn (2005) for detailed discussions of the weak-strong pronoun distinction in English and other languages.

Evidence discussed in Mitchell (1985), Kemenade (1987), Koopman (1992), Allen (1995), and Pintzuk (1995) indicates that the morphological case form of any pronoun (or full noun phrase) in Old English was determined by its argument structure status and by the lexical properties of the associated predicate. This applies not only to lone, unmodified pronouns (1)-(5), but also to conjoined and modified pronouns (3)-(6).

(1) *oþ þæt* ***hie*** ***hine*** *ofslægenne hæfdon*
until 3pl.NOM/ACC 3sgM.ACC slain had
'until they had killed him'
(*Parker Chronicle* 48.4 (755)) [Denison 1993: 343]

(2) *hi ne demað nanum men, ac* ***him*** *bið gedemed*
3pl.NOM not judge no.PL.DAT men.PL.DAT but 3pl.DAT be.SG judged
'They will not judge any men, but they will be judged.'
(*Ælfric Homilies* XI, 369) [Allen 1995: 27]

(3) *[****ic*** *& þæt cild] gað unc to gebiddene,*
1sg.NOM & that.NEUT.NOM/ACC child.NOM/ACC go 1du.OBJ to pray,
& ***we*** *syððan cumað sona eft* <u>*to*</u> ***eow***
and 1pl.NOM afterwards come soon after to 2pl.OBJ
'I and the child will go to pray and soon afterwards we will come to you'
(*The Old Testament* Genesis 22.5) [Helsinki Corpus][3]

[3] I would like to thank the Oxford Text Archive for granting me access to the Helsinki Corpus of English Texts. Many thanks to Christian Langstrof for help with the glossing and translation of examples (3) and (5).

(4) *and þæt* ***he*** *[**him** and his geferan] bigleofan*

and that 3sgM.NOM 3sgM.DAT and his companions food

ðenian wolde

serve would

'and that he would serve him and his companions food'

(*Ælfric Catholic Homilies* ii.9.78.198) [Koopman 1992: 61]

(5) *for* ***þu*** *eart ealre demena dema and nu*

for 2sg.NOM are all.GEN judge.PL.GEN judge.NOM and now

*between [**me** and **heom**]*

between 1sg.OBJ and 3pl.DAT

'for you are the judge of all judges and now between me and them'

(*Passion of St Margaret* 174.174) [Helsinki Corpus]

(6) *eallum mannum to steore, [eallum folce þa ðe geo wæs,*

all.DAT persons.DAT to direction all.DAT people then that once was

*ge [**us** þe nu sindan]]*

and 1pl.OBJ that now are

'all persons to direction, all people then that once were and us that now are'

(*Ælfric Wulstan* 188.120) [Brooklyn Corpus 2000][4]

2 Pronoun case in Modern English

In Modern English, lone unmodified pronouns consistently surface in their nominative case form when they appear as the (preverbal) subject of a finite clause (7), and they take the objective form when they appear in canonical direct object position (8), or as the subject of a nonfinite complement clause (9).

[4] I would like to thank Susan Pintzuk for granting me access to the Brooklyn-Geneva-Amsterdam-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English.

(7) **I/he/she/we/they** rang the police straight away.

(8) The police rang **me/him/her/us/them** last night.

(9) The police expected **me/him/her/us/them** to ring.[5]

Coordinated and modified pronouns, on the other hand, have often been noted to exhibit considerable case variation in Modern English (cf. Jespersen & Haislund 1949, Visser 1963, Klima 1964, Erdmann 1978, Emonds 1985 & 1986, Householder 1986 & 1987, Parker et al. 1988, Quattlebaum 1994, Quinn 1995, Wales 1996, Sobin 1997 & 2005, Boyland 2001, Angermeyer & Singler 2003, John Taggart Clark p.c.).

2.1 The case of weak pronouns

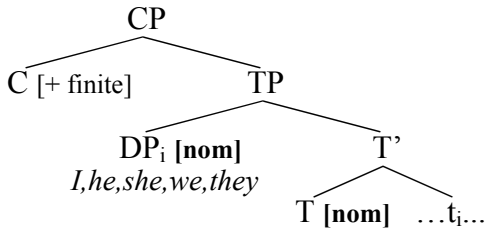
I propose that the presence versus absence of variation in pronoun case choice in Modern English correlates with the morphosyntactic status of the pronoun. The pronouns in (7)-(9) are weak, and therefore need to be licensed in the specifier of an agreement-related functional head (cf. Cardinaletti & Starke 1999).[6] Since the functional heads involved in the licensing of weak subject and object pronouns are also associated with what I will term 'Positional Case' checking, a weak pronoun that has raised to [Spec, TP] of a finite clause will consistently surface in the nominative case (10), while a weak pronoun that has raised to [Spec, *v*P] will surface in its objective case form (11), no matter whether it has originated in the same clause (8) or in a complement clause (9).[7]

[5] See Fischer et al. (2000: 220-247) for evidence that this kind of ECM construction did not exist in Old English, and only started to emerge during the Middle English period, i.e. only when morphological licensing had been lost and pronoun case was starting to correlate with surface position (cf. Section 3).

[6] I assume that the syntactic deficiency of weak pronouns arises from the lack of a lexical head inside the weak DP (cf. Panagiotidis 2002: 187).

[7] Note that I am treating Positional Case checking as a constraint on the form of pronouns in particular syntactic positions. Positional Case checking does not trigger movement, and it does not serve to eliminate uninterpretable features from the derivation.

(10)



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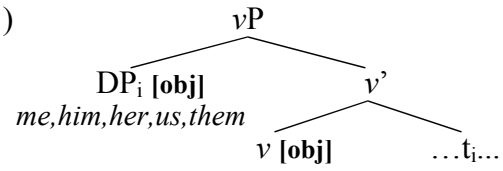


2.2 The case of strong pronouns

Strong pronouns do not have to enter into a spec-head relationship with an agreement-related functional head to be licensed, and generally appear in positions that are to some extent immune to Positional Case influences. To gain a better understanding of the linguistic factors influencing the case of modified and coordinated pronouns, I carried out a written survey of 90 native speakers of New Zealand English. All of the survey participants were enrolled in non-linguistic first year courses at the University of Canterbury when the survey started in July 1996.[8]

Results from this survey suggest that in Present-Day English strong pronoun forms do to some extent reflect the argument status and overall syntactic position of (the construction containing) the strong pronoun. Speakers were most likely to opt for nominative case forms in questionnaire items such as (12)-(14), where coordinated (12)-(13) or modified (14) pronouns appear as the subject of a finite clause. Objective case forms were most likely to be selected in object (15)-(17) or prepositional complement items (18)-(20).

[8] The empirical study discussed in this section was supported by a University of Canterbury PhD scholarship and University of Canterbury Research Grant U6206. I would like to thank all the students at the University of Canterbury who participated in the empirical survey, as well as the following linguists who provided inspiration, support, and advice on various aspects of the analysis presented here: Kate Kearns, Liz Pearce, Dianne Massam, Shizuka Torii, Lyle Campbell, Jen Hay, Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy, Richard Kayne, Halldór Sigurðsson, Ed Zoerner, Janne Johannessen, and Elly van Gelderen. Any mistakes are of course my own.

(12) *Please complete the sentence using two of the following words:* ***me, him, I, he***

You may not believe it, but Callum is really keen on cooking. _____ and _____ have just taken part in one of these workshops on Asian food, and he can't wait to try some of the recipes. **[qu032]**

(13) *Please complete the sentence using two of the following words:* ***them, us, we, they***

We'll probably share a bus with Burnside-West. _____ and _____ are the only teams from Christchurch that have made the play-offs. **[qu185]**

(14) *Please complete the sentence using one of the following words:* ***us, we***

_____ New Zealanders must stick together. **[qu163]**

(15) *Please complete the sentence using two of the following words:* ***him, me, he, I***

If Morris is late, would you mind taking _____ and _____ to the airport? **[qu011]**

(16) *Please complete the sentence using two of the following words:* ***we, they, us, them***

I can't blame Tim and Rachel for being scared of Alan. He's already threatened _____ and _____ with legal proceedings, and there's no telling what he might do next. **[qu231]**

(17) *Please complete the sentence using one of the following words:* ***we, us***

Society just doesn't understand _____ young people. **[qu136]**

(18) *Please complete the sentence using two of the following words:* ***I, him, me, he***

This flat was Ken's idea. The apartment the company had offered to _____ and _____ was just perfect, but of course he had to go for a unit twice the size. **[qu029]**

(19) *Please complete the sentence using two of the following words:* ***them, we, they, us***

I'd go along with Jocelyn and Tony's suggestion. Brian does the lawns for _____ and _____ from time to time, and I think he'd do a pretty good job on this section. **[qu209]**

(20) *Please complete the sentence using one of the following words:* ***us, we***

It's a hard life for _____ students. **[qu141]**

As can be seen from Tables 1-3, we find a general trend towards the use of invariant *me, him, her, us, them* in all strong pronoun contexts (cf. Klima 1964, Harris 1981, Emonds 1985 & 1986, Kjellmer 1986, Householder 1986 &1987, Jones 1988, Denison 1993, and Wales 1996 for similar observations). This trend is quite pronounced for 1pl, but much less noticeable in the distribution of 1sg case forms.

Table 1. Results for items where a 1pl pronoun is modified by a noun phrase[9]

subject (qu163)		**object of V** (qu136)		**complement of P** (qu141)	
	# of sp.		# of sp.		# of sp.
we-NP	62	us-NP	80	us-NP	80
us-NP	29	we-NP	11	we-NP	10
total	91	total	91	total	90

Table 2. Results for free conjunct order items involving a 1sg and 3sgM pronoun

subject (qu032)		**object of V** (qu011)		**complement of P** (qu029)	
	# of sp.		# of sp.		# of sp.
he & I	45	him & I	30	him & I	37
him & I	35	him & me	29	him & me	30
me & him	9	me & him	27	me & him	16
him & me	2	he & I	4	he & I	7
I & he	0	I & he	0	I & he	0
I & him	0	I & him	0	I & him	0
me & he	0	me & he	0	me & he	0
he & me	0	he & me	0	he & me	0
total	91[10]	total	90	total	90

[9] The totals for 1pl-NP in subject and object position exceed 90, because one speaker offered both *we-NP* and *us-NP* in these two contexts.

[10] The total exceeds 90, because one speaker offered both *he & I* and *him & I*.

Table 3. Results for free conjunct order items involving a 1pl and 3pl pronoun

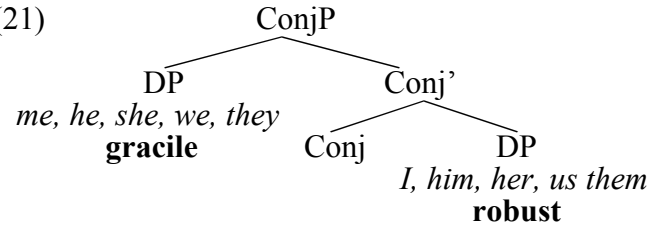
subject (qu185)		**object of V** (qu231)		**complement of P** (qu209)	
	# of sp.		# of sp.		# of sp.
them & us	37	them & us	64	them & us	64
they & us	18	us & them	18	us & them	22
us & them	16	they & us	6	they & us	3
they & we	7	we & them	2	us & they	1
we & them	6	they & we	0	we & them	0
we & they	6	we & they	0	we & they	0
us & they	0	us & they	0	us & they	0
them & we	0	them & we	0	them & we	0
total	90	total	90	total	90

At the same time, the survey results point to a correlation between the case of a pronoun and its relative position within a construction (cf. also Schwartz 1985, Zoerner 1995, Sobin 1997, Johannessen 1998, and Angermeyer & Singler 2003). This correlation is particularly strong for 1sg, which tends to surface as *me* in initial conjuncts and *I* in final conjunct position.

It is important to note that the grouping of case forms for the purposes of what I will term 'Relative Positional Coding' (21)-(22) does not follow the traditional nominative/objective distinction, but rather appears to be determined by phonological properties of the pronoun forms, most notably the feature-geometric complexity of the rhyme (cf. Kenstowicz 1994, Dogil & Luschützky 1990): the robust forms *I, him, her, us, them* have a greater phonological complexity than their gracile counterparts *me, he, she, we, they*, and they appear in the syntactically more complex asymmetrically c-commanded positions.[11]

[11] I would like to thank Kate Kearns for suggesting the terms 'gracile' and 'robust'. For detailed discussions of asymmetric c-command and syntactic complexity see Kayne (1994: 4), Hawkins (1994: 26-43) and Quinn (2005).

(21)



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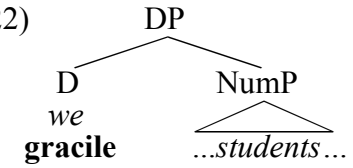


The influence of Relative Positional Coding and the trend towards invariant strong forms is evident in the individual case patterns of nearly all of the 90 survey participants. Most speakers exhibit different case preferences in initial and final conjuncts of subject coordinates (cf. Table 4), and many tend towards the use of *him, her, us, them* in all syntactic and conjunct positions (cf. A074 & A020 in Table 4).

Table 4. Speaker tables illustrating some commonly attested individual case patterns[12]

A047	**initial conjunct**					**final conjunct**				
S	me 60 I 40	he 88	she	we	they 90	I	he 80	she 67	we 90	they 63
O	me	him	her	us	them	me	him	her	us	them
P	me	him	her	us	them	me	him	her	us	them

A030	**initial conjunct**					**final conjunct**				
S	me	him 56 he 44	she 56 her 44	we 60 us 40	they 55 them 45	I	him 89	her	us	them 86
O	me	him	her	us	them	me 67	him 89	her	us	them
P	me	him	her	us	them	me 71	him	her 88	us	them

A074	**initial conjunct**					**final conjunct**				
S	me	him	her 78	us 75	them 75	I	him	her	us	them 70
O	me	him	her	us	them	I 78	him	her	us	them
P	me	him	her	us	them	I 89	him	her	us	them

A020	**initial conjunct**	**final conjunct**

[12] The speaker tables show the pronoun forms a speaker favoured in the relevant syntactic context. Where a speaker offered both the nominative and objective form of a pronoun in a particular syntactic position, the favoured case form is followed by the percentage of tokens taking this form. Both case forms of a pronoun plus percentages are provided if the speaker offered equal numbers of the two forms, or only one more instance of one form than of the alternative.

S	me	him 91	her 64	us 75	them	I	him	her	us	them
O	me	him 92	her	us	them	me 71	him	her	us	them
P	me	him	her	us	them	me 71	him	her	us	them

I propose that the divergence of the weak and strong pronoun series, and the close association between pronoun case and structural position in Modern English are by-products of the shift to exclusive positional licensing during the Middle English period (cf. Kiparsky 1997).

3 Argument licensing and pronoun case

In Old English, the status of an argument on the argument hierarchy of a verbal predicate was reflected partly in its case morphology (morphological licensing), and partly in its surface position (positional licensing). In the absence of lexical case marking, the highest argument on the argument hierarchy surfaced in the nominative case form, and the lowest argument on the hierarchy surfaced in the accusative case. The highest argument on the argument hierarchy was generally mapped into the highest argument position projected in the surface syntax.[13] This mapping between argument structure and surface position appears to have been obligatory when one of the arguments on the argument hierarchy was lexically case-marked by the verb (23)-(24) (cf. Kiparsky 1997: 479; Allen 1995: 96-157).

[13] See Allen (1995: 32-50, 417, 424), Pintzuk (1995 & 1996), and Kiparsky (1997: 469-472) for more detailed discussions of word order patterns in Old English.

(23) The effect of lexical feature-specification on structural feature and case assignment for the experiencer verb *lician* in Old English[14]

him ***gelicade*** ***hire*** ***þeawas***
3sgM.DAT liked her virtues.NOM/ACC
'He liked her virtues / Her virtues pleased him'
(*COE* Chron D (Classen-Harm) 1067.1.35)
[Allen 1995: 142]

lician [x LIKE y]	(Semantic Form)
λx λy	(structural arguments at TS[15])
[+ higher]	(structural features specified in the lexical entry of *lician*)
[+ lower] [- lower]	(structural features encoding the position of the arguments on the argument hierarchy)
DAT NOM	(argument cases available in
[+ higher] [ ]	Old English and their
[+ lower]	structural features)

(24) The mapping from argument structure to surface position in positional licensing

lician [x LIKE y]	(Semantic Form)
λx λy	(structural arguments at TS)
highest position lower position	(argument positions available
(e.g. [Spec, TP])	in the surface syntax)

A series of phonological changes at the end of the Old English period led to the neutralisation between nominative and accusative case forms of nouns, adjectives, and determiners (cf. Allen 1995: 163ff, 171f, 190f), which effectively eliminated the possibility

[14] The approach to structural linking adopted here uses the feature system proposed by Wunderlich (1997), but is otherwise compatible with the approach put forward by Kiparsky (1997).
[+ higher] = there is a higher argument [- higher] = there is no higher argument
[+ lower] = there is a lower argument [- lower] = there is no lower argument
The case linking analysis for *lician* is based on Wunderlich's (1997: 52) analysis of the German experiencer verb *gefallen*, which appears to have the same argument structure properties as *lician* (cf. Allen 1995: 141). As noted by Kate Kearns (p.c.), the assumption that *x* occupies a higher argument structure position than *y* in [x LIKE y], receives support from Wechsler's (1995: 35ff) Notion Rule. The Notion Rule prohibits any semantic representations where the lower argument of a predicate has a notion of the higher argument, but not vice versa (Wechsler 1995: 36, 47).

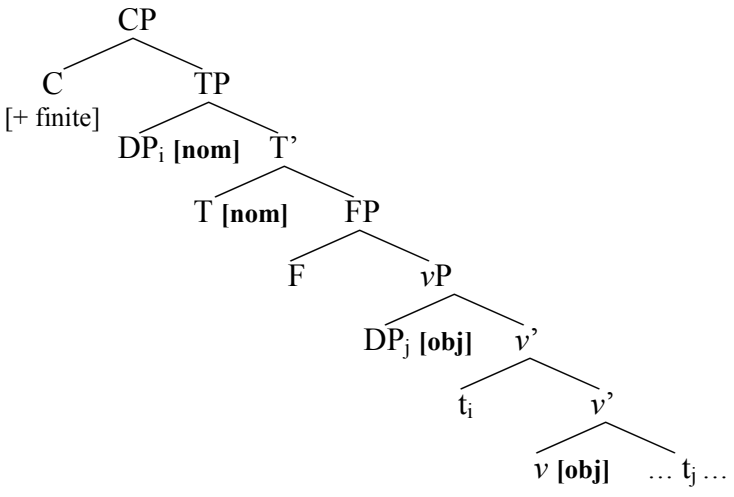
[15] TS = θ-structure, an interface level between semantic form and phrase structure.

of licensing arguments through morphology rather than surface position (cf. Kiparsky 1997: 488, McFadden 2004: 186).

The loss of morphological licensing and the gradual demise of lexical case marking during the Middle English period both strengthened the correlation between case and surface position for pronouns. When arguments can only be licensed positionally and predicates are no longer able to assign lexical case, both the (canonical) surface position and the case of an argument will be determined solely by its position on the argument hierarchy.

Although pronominal objects could originally raise to a position fairly high in the clause, they started to lose this ability at the end of the Old English period (cf. Kemenade 1987: 189-196, Allen 1995: 34, Fischer et al. 2000: 105-128 & 160-179). By Late Middle English, preverbal pronominal objects seem to have all but disappeared from the language (cf. Kroch & Taylor 2000: 161f). So during the Middle English period we already find a tendency for weak pronouns to be licensed in [Spec, TP][16] if they occupy the highest position on the argument hierarchy of a verbal predicate, and in [Spec, *v*P] if they occupy a lower argument position. As a result, nominative case marking would have started to correlate with the appearance of a pronoun in [Spec, TP], while objective case marking would have become associated with [Spec, *v*P] (25).

(25)

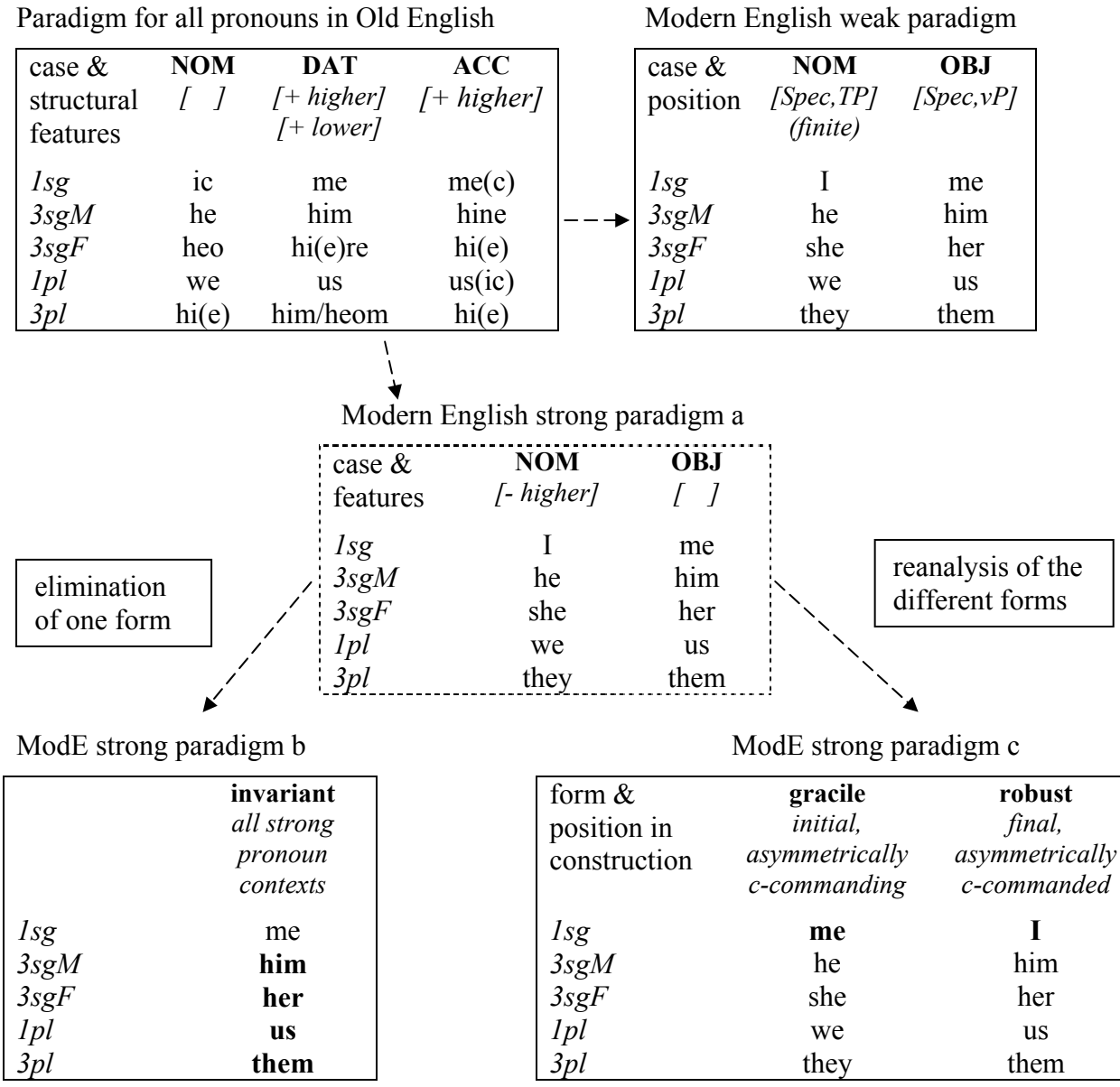


[16] Or possibly the specifier of a higher functional projection (cf. Fischer et al. 2000: 123-137)

Since strong pronouns tend to be in some way separated from the agreement-related functional heads associated with Positional Case checking (cf. Section 2), the case form of a strong pronoun could generally not have been interpreted as encoding a direct spec-head relationship between the pronoun and an agreement-related functional head. At the same time, the loss of morphological licensing dramatically reduced the motivation for signalling the argument structure status of a pronoun through case morphology. As a result, the alternation between nominative and objective forms in strong pronoun contexts would have lost much of its original 'Argument Case' significance by the end of the Middle English period.

As illustrated in Table 5, the subsequent developments in the English strong pronoun paradigm tie in with the predictions of the Blocking Principle: on the one hand, we find a general trend towards the use of objective case forms in all strong pronoun contexts (paradigm b), and on the other hand, there is evidence for a reanalysis of the different forms as markers of relative position within a syntactic construction (paradigm c).

Table 5. Overview of the pronoun case changes discussed in this paper



Even the form-meaning mapping in Modern English paradigm a differs from that found in the Old English pronoun paradigm. Thus, the least specified case in Old English is the nominative case (NOM), whereas in Modern English it is the objective case (OBJ) that lacks a specific feature value. I propose that the change in the feature specification of Argument cases took place at the end of the Old English period and is responsible for the occurrence of examples like (26) in Early Middle English texts (cf. Allen 1995: 237ff; Kiparsky 1997: 470).

(26) *for þi ðat him areowe ow*

for that that 3sgM.OBJ pity 2pl.OBJ

'in order that he would pity you'

(*Ancrene Wisse* 36.16) [Allen 1995: 238]

Although (26) has the same argument structure properties as the Old English example in (23), the target of the emotion (*ow*) surfaces in the objective rather than the nominative case. The use of the objective form falls out naturally if we assume that NOM now bears the feature specification [- higher], while OBJ is unspecified for structural features (27).

(27) The effect of lexical feature-specification on structural feature and case assignment for the experiencer verb *areowen* in Early Middle English

areowen [x PITY y]	(Semantic Form)
λx λy	(structural arguments at TS)
[+ higher]	(structural features specified in the lexical entry of *areowen*)
[+ lower] [- lower]	(structural features encoding the position of the arguments on the argument hierarchy)
NOM [- higher] OBJ [ ]	(argument cases available in Middle English and Modern English and their structural features)

4 Summary and speculations

I have argued that changes in the licensing of structural arguments during the Middle English period have had important consequences for the form-meaning mapping in the strong pronoun paradigm. In keeping with the predictions of the Blocking Principle, the weakening of the original meaning distinction between nominative and objective case forms has led to both a trend towards invariant strong pronoun forms, and a reanalysis of the forms as markers of a new meaning difference. In view of the importance of positional licensing in Modern English, and the close correlation between the surface form and surface position of weak

pronouns, it is not entirely unexpected that the new coding function acquired by strong pronoun forms should be related to positional relationships in the surface syntax.[17]

In the absence of a detailed diachronic study, it is difficult to know exactly which factors led to the grouping of pronoun forms associated with Relative Positional Coding, but it seems likely that the asymmetric c-command relationship between nominative and objective Positional Case checking positions (25) contributed to the association of the nominative strong pronoun forms *he, she, we, they* with c-commanding positions, and the objective strong pronoun forms *him, her, us, them* with c-commanded positions.

As discussed in Section 2.2, the classification of *me* as gracile and *I* as robust is likely to be due to phonological factors, but it may have been reinforced by the emphasis on certain pronoun case configurations in prescriptive texts. For example, prescriptivists often criticise the use of *me* in initial conjuncts of subject coordinates, and instead advocate the use of *I* in final conjunct position (28).

(28) When a country cousin remarks that '**Me** and Tom' have done so and so, it is necessary for the town cousin, in the interests of polite speech and general gentility, to reply that the same thing was once done by 'Tom and **I**'.

(*The Press*, 8 October 1887)

[17] Cf. SigurÞsson's (2005) observations that 'case poor' Germanic languages (i.e. languages where case morphology is confined to pronouns) tend to employ morphological case distinctions for a range of different purposes which suggest that case is best viewed as 'an interpretation of *various* syntactic structures in morphological terms'.

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